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ABSTRACT

To help students develop a broadly generative approach to reading and writing about literature, teachers of literature should employ not only systematic procedures, but also the eclectic and utilitarian spirit of rhetorical invention. A semiotic perspective offers the most solid theoretical foundation for establishing a genuinely heuristic approach to texts, one capable of encompassing and organizing a variety of interpretive schemata. Using a grid format to illustrate the multiple perspectives that semiotics bring to texts, students are encouraged to examine texts through the two overlapping perspectives--linguistic and cultural--implicit in structuralist and semiotic readings. The linguistic perspective, with categories of repetition, variation, and progression, explores significance as both static (focusing on the oppositions of similarity/dissimilarity, resemblance/difference, or repetition/variation) and dynamic (the progressive unfolding of meaning through shifting relationships generated by the sequential appearance of textual features). From the cultural perspective--in categories of text, literary context, author, and social context--students examine the codes that shape the text's production, considering the work's textuality, intertextuality, and extratextuality. Such a rhetorically-generated grid, drawing on both configurations and extratextual considerations, can simultaneously identify competing interpretive centers while placing them in relation to each other, allowing students to experience interpretation as a creative act. (A chart of the interacting perspectives of linguistic and cultural phenomena is included, and eight references are appended.) (MM)

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From Heuristics to Hermeneutics: Aiding Invention in the Undergraduate Literature Class

Composition studies have witnessed an impressive revival of interest in the pedagogy of invention during the past twenty-five years. Contemporary handbooks and rhetorics alike suggest a wide range of investigative procedures for exploring expository and persuasive topics, ranging from freewriting exercises to Burke's pentad, Aristotle's topics, even Toulmin's non-formal logic. During the same time, literary studies have witnessed a similar interest in developing the inventive powers of students. We have come to realize that reading, no less than writing, is inventive. But as we try to help our students develop a broadly generative approach to reading and writing about literature, we need to bring not only the systematic procedures but also the eclectic and utilitarian spirit of rhetorical invention to the literature classroom. Specifically, we need to teach our students to treat hermeneutics as heuristics: as means, not ends, as potential generators of significance, not competing interpretations of reality. What I hope to present is a pedagogical approach that may enable us to encourage this genuinely rhetorical, heuristic perspective on invention in the literature classroom.

The range of procedures for generative readings is as broad as their theoretical foundations are diverse. Norman Holland and David Bleich, for example, have drawn interpretive procedures from the theoretical foundations of reader-response criticism. Others have developed classroom pedagogies

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for reading based upon deconstruction; some of the most notable appear in Douglas Atkins and Michael Johnson's Writing and Reading Differently: Deconstruction and the Teaching of Composition and Literature (U P of Kansas, 1985). Still others have found in Freud a fruitful point of departure for teaching reading as an interpretive, creative act. Patricia Donahue and Ellen Quandahl, for example, have described a guided sequence for critical reading extrapolated from Freud's reading of dreams; Gregory Ulmer has described the use of Freudian insights in the humanities classroom as a means of encouraging invention in the creation as well as criticism of art and literature.

It is the semiotic perspective growing out of structuralism, however, that seems to offer the sturdiest theoretical foundation for establishing a genuinely heuristic approach to texts, one capable of encompassing and organizing a variety of interpretive schemata. As Jonathan Culler has noted, structuralism "is not [itself] hermeneutic. . . .it is the theory and practice of reading" (258); its goal is to enable readers to function more powerfully in their highest role, the role of "homo significans" (264). And while structuralism, in the words of Robert de Beaugrande, has perhaps failed in its aspiration to "transform literary studies into a genuine science" (254), it does encourage the kind of generative and utilitarian approach to literary texts that in its systematic procedures holds pedagogical promise.

Robert Scholes has explored this promise more completely than perhaps any other. As he notes in Semiotics and Interpretation,

> Instruction is reading must both socialize and desocialize. That is, students need to acquire the intepretive codes of their culture, but they also need to see them as codes, so they can appreciate those texts that reshape accepted ideas and at the same time defend themselves against the manipulative exploitation of received opinion. (14)

Scholes develops a pedagogy for acomplishing these aims in Textual Power. In this work he suggests a three-part interaction with the text. In the first stage, reading, the teacher introduces and identifies the major codes operating in texts. In the second, interpretation, the class moves beyond identifying codes to synthesizing them in discussions of content and theme. In the final stage, criticism, students are encouraged to respond, question, and disagree with the views of the world presented in the work of literature.

In a recent review of Scholes' book, John Clifford has identified the obvious difficulties with this interactive approach. How can teachers train students to recognize the codes that, from the semiotic perspective, are the loci of meaning within texts? Undergraduate students lack Scholes' formidable background in semiotics, literature, and culture. As a result, they are forced, in his words, to "passively watch the master unravel mysteries" as the teacher identifies and manipulates the "many levels of cultural and literary codes to which texts can be compared, codes that college sophomores could not possibly possess." (702) The solution to this problem is not abandoning the semiotic perspective (which Clifford suggests) but finding ways to lead students to discover salient codes for themselves. As the semiotic approach leads students to recognize and apply a variety of codes, it can accomplish in the literature classroom the three ends of heuristics that Young, Becker, and Pike outlined nearly twenty years ago for expository composition. That is, it can

> (1) help students recall information they already possess,
> (2) guide their further investigation of subjects, and
> (3) provide a foundation for developing hypotheses about phenomena (120).

These ends are as pertinent for students who are writing literary analysis as they are for students writing in other modes about other subject matter.

What I want to present, then, is a heuristic for guiding "reading," the first stage of Scholes' three-part pedagogy for achieving "textual power," one that will help function heuristically, taking meaning from the teachers' hands and helping guide students to discover their own meanings.

The multiple perspectives that semiotics bring to texts are perhaps most easily localized in the grid format already familiarized by Young, Becker, and Pike. This schematic layout is not only familiar to many students; the two axes of this grid can be used to encourage students to examine texts through two overlapping perspectives implicit in structuralist and semiotic readings, enabling them to view the works they read simultaneously as linguistic and cultural phenomena.

One axis of this grid uses considerations of paradigmatic and syntagmatic structure, diachronic and synchronic perspectives, to explore significance as both static (the result of the text's opaque objectivity, the totality of relationships between textual features) and dynamic (the result of a progressive unfolding of meaning through the shifting relationships generated through the sequential appearance of textual features). In its examination of static (or more precisely, paradigmatic) relationships, this perspective focuses on the binary opposition that may be variously phrased as similarity/dissimilarity, resemblance/difference, or repetition/variation. In its dynamic perspective, the analysis adds the dimension of time to these patterns of relationship. These considerations can be articulated in the three categories of Repetition, Variation, and Progression.

The other axis encourages students to consider the broad range of significance that any text possesses as a phenomenon of the culture in which it is produced and read. First, it leads students to examine (without privileging) the codes that shaped the text's production. Even more importantly, it

directs them to consider the three perspectives that cultural semiotics bring to bear on texts. That is, it directs students to consider the work's textuality, focusing their attention upon textual features and patterns while making them aware of the literary artifact's distinctive impulse toward reflexive rather than referential signification. (Keats' nightingale, for example, is more significant in its juxtaposition with the poet than through any reference to Luscinia megarhynchos.) Next, it encourages them to consider the work's intertextuality, the dialogue any work establishes with its textual predecessors as well as its contemporaries. Source studies and genre studies for example, cluster in this perspective.

Finally, it leads students to consider the work's extratextuality, a perspective which includes the vast array of interpretive codes that operate outside specific texts. As Ann Shuckman explains, these include a wide range of interpretive codes: "The literary tradition in which the author is writing (or against which he is reacting), his real historical situation, his ideology; it may also be the expectations, situation and foreknowledge of the reader" (qtd. in Orr 819). This perspective would encourage students to explore the ways different social communities have interacted with texts. Most importantly, perhaps, it will help students to see that the codes that generate meaning reside in the reader as well as in the author or the text itself. Its interpretive paradigms would be drawn from many disciplines of inquiry historically and ahistorically considered, including philosophy, theology, economics. This cultural perspective may be tabulated in four tiers: Text, Literary Context, Author, and Social Context.

The integration of these two axes would appear in the form of the accompanying grid. Within each block I have tried to suggest representative questions that each pair of interacting perspectives on the work would generate.

	REPETITION	VARIATION	PROGRESSION
TEXT	What words, actions, structures, characters, or settings are repeated in the text?	What words, actions, structures, characters, or settings are juxtaposed in the text? What polarities govern its textual features?	What changes in setting, characterization, diction, or perspective unfold meaning in the text?
LITERARY CONTEXT	What other works does it resemble in tone, imagery, content, theme, or form? In what genre may the work be classified?	How does this work differ in tone, imagery, form, etc., from others in its class?	How does the work reflect, shape, or otherwise contribute to the genre to which it belongs?
AUTHOR	Does the author repeat themes, images, or structures he employs elsewhere? How does the work repeat events or concerns in the author's life?	How does this work differ in theme, imagery, or structure from other works by the author? How does the work alter biographical events or concerns?	Where does this work fit into the writer's overall artistic or philosophical development?
SOCIAL CONTEXT	In what ways does the text reflect the concerns of a social, economic, philosophical, psychological, or theological perspective?	How does this work differ from similar works composed in the same general social context?	How does the text draw from or contribute to the general history of ideas?

The adaptation of this heuristic in the undergraduate literature class, of course, does not entirely free Scholes' process from Clifford's strictures. Teachers can seldom assume that their students share a common acquaintance with any standard body of literary texts or conventions or that they possess any common knowledge of philosophy, psychology, or the history of ideas. These and other constraints may well restrict any attempts at comprehensive explorations of the grid to advanced studies at best. At the undergraduate level, though, this grid can perhaps encourage generative "readings" compatible with Scholes' model in a process that will place the teacher in a less prescriptive role. Functioning as a heuristic, it can lead students to identify the common topics of literary analysis and apply their essential perspectives -- the notions of text and context, static and dynamic significance -- as well as to offer them the opportunity to explore the relations between textual features and contextual stimulants and constraints invited by the grid's multiple perspectives.

A very partial reading of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in closing, may illustrate the scope of critical perspectives revealed by this structuralist heuristic. Students, for example, could begin exploring the poem's textuality by identifying the salient repetitions and oppositions of equivalent terms in it. Application of this perspective to the opening stanza, for instance, can quickly reveal the poem's significant polarities: men and gods, Tempe and Arcady, time and timelessness. Students could then explore the less explicit repetitions of equivalent relationships, the ways in which the relationship of the poet to urn is repeated in the reader's relationship with the poem. The addition of the dynamic perspective would lead students to considerations of the poet's shifting imaginative distance that Cleanth Brooks has so well articulated in "The Well-Wrought Urn." Initially approaching the urn as an object of contemplation, the poet first subjects it to incessant if not very profitable questioning before imaginatively identifying with its state of eternal

sensuousness; losing that sense of identity in the fourth stanza, he is forced again by the end of the poem into a contemplative rather than imaginative relationship with the work of art.

Considerations of the literary context would lead students to compare and contrast Keats's poem with the traditional ode, discovering in what ways Keats incorporates elements of the classic and the English ode, finding the residual presences of strophe and antistrophe, and discovering how they contribute the the poem's configurations of meaning. To explore the significant variations, students could, in turn, compare the poem's rhyme scheme with that of the English sonnet, and in this comparison trace the distinctive patterns of closure that form encourages. On the other hand, it might also lead students to examine content rather than form, searching for similar treatments of theme or imagery in other works that may function as sources or analogues to Keats' text.

The remaining two tiers, the perspective of author and social context, demand more guidance from the instructor, who through lecture or guided student research must describe interpretive paradigms. In exploring these two, even more than in the literary context, teachers may well be forced, for pedagogical purposes, to simplify the perspectives and limit them in number and sophistication. What is lost in interpretive subtlety, one hopes, will be gained in hermeneutic breadth.

Students, for example, might explore the author tier by examining the connections between Keats's poem and his experience with the Elgin marbles or his personal sense of impending mortality. Or teachers might direct students to more sophisticated exploration of the codes of production by encouraging them to consider the impact of the Christian code of transcendence, a code that perhaps helped shape the poem's structure. Given this guidance, students may interpret the poem as a secularized quest for transcendence that has translated the vision of eternal plentitude from God to art. From this perspective, the urn, as a

human artifact, functions as a mediatory figure; simultaneously partaking of the intensity of human sensation and the eternality of impenetrable objectivity, it spans the gulf between human existence and eternal being. As Christ or prophet, the urn, in the poem's final lines, cryptically speaks its salvific message; truth and beauty, intensity and eternity, are not only compatible but also identical in the artist's beatific vision.

Finally, a Freudian paradigm drawn from the social context tier (the contemporary reader's context, of course, rather than the author's) may interpret the poet's fascination with the artistic object as a transparent displacement of erotic desire. The urn functions as a receptacle for the poet's dream of semantic potency, its overdetermination as a literary sign, manifesting what Freud calls, in an essay entitled "The Most Prevalent Form of Degredation in Erotic Life," the "normal overestimation of the sexual object characteristic of men" (176). In the sexual reductiveness of this hermeneutic, the urn itself finally may be viewed as a displacement of the generative womb, the origin of being, the now unattainable place of complete unity and happiness with the mother. ("The Most Prevalent Form," 152-153.) Consequently, the poet's displaced dream of complete identity with and possession of the matrix of significance is foredoomed to the sense of inconsolable loss and abandonment characterizing the final stanza. From this perspective, students could discuss the ways in which the semantic fullness of the work results from Keats's characteristic if unintended collapsing of the twin impulses of life and death, the central impulses of the human psyche according to Freud, into a single image.

Although students no less than teachers perhaps may inevitably give priority to one interpretation, such multiplicity of perspective encourages students to see the nature of interpretation as a creative yet systematic activity, to see that while meaning may be relative, it is not purely

subjective. Such a rhetorically-generated grid, drawing on both textual configurations and extra-textual considerations, can simultaneously identify competing interpretive centers while placing them in relation to each other. In the resonance and dissonance of autonomous and incompatible paradigms, students can authentically experience intepretation as a creative act, no less generative than composition itself. And perhaps in the indeterminacy and ambiguities of texts, students will discover the potentially diverse interpretations of their own experience.

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